



THE CHRISTMAS CHILD

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Cover and inside back cover art taken from a hand-painted pall depicting

**The Christ Child,
sinless and pure,
trusting in His Heavenly Father,
adoring His Pure and Loving Mother, and
loving His hard-working and protective father on earth.**

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THE CHRISTMAS CHILD

THE PROPHECY

Beyond all else Christmas means children. Beyond all children, Christmas especially means -- one Child.

Even the sad pagans of our modern day, who have rudely excluded that Divine Child from Christmas, have, because of Him, kept the day sacred to children.

Where the Christ Child is loved for Himself and is seen in the little children who are beautifully like Him, Christmas is the day, beyond all other days, when love moves over the earth with lighted tapers, and the virtues of childhood make young once more a weary, aging humanity.

Even where the Christ Child is forgotten or ignored, His little ones for a single day waken a new tenderness and unselfish affection in human hearts. On this single day, the innocence of childhood and its unquenchable faith in the goodness of others curve into smiles even those cynical lips that have drunk deep of sin and grown bitter in sneers.

For Christmas begins and ends with a Child. The Infant in the manger saw prophecies fulfilled, the angels sing, the poor kneel with no gifts except the priceless gift of patient affection, the rich come, guilt-laden but with a strange humility bringing low their heads. His birth saw all humanity reborn to a new era of grace, hope, and God's revelation of love and graciousness. "A child is born to us and a son is given to us," cried Isaiah in ecstatic prophecy. He saw this Child in a vision, born of a Virgin, in God's beautiful promise and sign, and his heart burst forth in the first glad Christmas greeting, "A child is born to us and a son is given to us." Then, from that joyful prophecy flowed all the joy and peace and Christmas spirit that coursed hopefully through the Old Law unto glorious fulfillment in the New.

THE SHEPHERDS

Over the heads of the patiently watchful shepherds, the glory of a star ripped the satin curtains of night. Then angel hands thrust back the torn shreds of gold and purple sky and the uncontrollable joy of heaven itself leaped forth to sing of a Child.

"Glory to God in the highest," because of that Child. "And on earth peace to men of good will," who from that moment would find themselves kneeling in complete happiness beside that Golden Babe.

Startled, the shepherds looked up at the splendor flung unexpectedly into their drab lives. True peasants, they noted with instinctive relief that their lambs on the hillside grazed unafraid either of the star, the angel messengers, or the swelling chorus. How could these lambs of the poor (later the favorite subject of the Savior's parables) be flung into confusion by news that the Lamb of God had come to shepherd all His sheep?

"Today is born to you a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Their slow minds were not too dull to realize that tonight their beloved Scriptures were fulfilled. This was the expected King of whom the angels sang. Startling as were the signs by which they were to recognize Him, swaddling clothes and a manger, they broke into headlong flight down the hill and flung themselves in adoration before the Child held up to them by the sweetest mother in all human history.

The childlike faith and hope of simple peasants found fulfillment in a Child. Christmas came rushing into their eventless lives on the wings of an infant's smile and the low-voiced gratitude of a mother welcoming these first Christmas guests who, in a beautiful single gesture, adored her Son and filled her day with the sweet fragrance of their Christmas greeting.

THE MAGI

"Where is He that was born King of the Jews?" The question, repeated a thousand times along their tedious way through the desert and sprawling villages and nomadic tribes and smug, white-roofed cities, was answered with shrugged shoulders and cynically turned backs, with significant touching of foreheads and frankly contemptuous laughter. Undismayed, the Magi were drawn forward on their quest by the vague hope of finding a Child.

More than likely, they dreamed of palace gates swinging wide to welcome them as grooms swept forward to catch their camels by their tinkling bridles and pages helped them to dismount.

Surely, the child of a king would rest upon the softest down, under coverlets of purple damask. Hushed attendants might permit them a glimpse of newborn royalty between the crossed lances of sleepless sentinels. Yet even this glimpse would be reward enough, they felt, for their weary desert road, the tireless swaying of their camels, and the nightlong journeys in pursuit of a forward moving star.

For here was a Child tall enough to light a blaze in the heavens. In the ancient papyri written for a mighty Cyrus by a Jew named Daniel, they were assured this was no ordinary child who was born under a flaming star.

Were they at first, even for an instant, bitterly taken aback? Did they almost turn away in disappointment from the dark mouth of this unguarded stable? Probably they caught up their silken gowns as they stepped through cattle pens and sheepfolds to the dark hill cave, unlighted except for the now motionless star.

Then, they saw the Child and all of Christmas welled up in their souls. What did it matter that He lay, not on orient silk but on crackling straw; that an exquisite maid and a dignified carpenter (to their aristocratic minds, a contradiction--a carpenter with such poise and dignity) were His only courtiers; that the bleak walls of the stable, rough-hewn from the black earth of the hill, were bare of heraldic standards of scarlet and gold; or that no sentries flashed warning swords to restrain intruders?

Faith swept them forward in its high tide. A Child they had come to seek. Yet in all the world there was no child like this.

He wore His swaddling clothes as if they were Tyrian purple. He lay in a manger that seemed like a conquered world. The circle of His tiny arms was vast enough to embrace all humanity. He smiled and the light of a new era dawned.

They had come to find a child king who was to conquer and save the world. Naturally, they had dreamed of a kingship demonstrated by columns of palace guards and fluttering choirs of nurses, by carved ebony and beaten gold upon his crib, and by breathless statesmen adding his name to the line of royal ancestors—he the heir of their greatness and their petty crimes, their occasional acts of kingliness and their frequent baseness and stupid cruelty and criminal lust. They knew no other kings or sons of kings than these.

They had not dared dream of a Child whose evident kingship made a palace out of a stable and a throne out of straw heaped for oxen. They had not wildly imagined a sovereign who could conquer because he was without weapons and who won His followers, not by the cold aloofness of power, but by the warm approachableness of His weakness and His love.

Before this Child of the poor, these rich men eagerly poured the tribute of their gifts. Before this Infant who contained all that the world needed to be saved, these wise men bent submissive knees.

Although the shepherds in their simple ignorance and the Magi in their deep wisdom were unaware of it, around this Child, from the very beginning, vortexed the complete drama of humanity's best and basest emotions.

He had been welcomed, as every great benefactor of humanity is welcomed, with cruel indifference and rudely slammed doors. Yet, if the doors of earth were barred in His face, the gates of heaven broke open to welcome Him.

No child had ever felt, even in the heart of the most unselfish mother, the maternal love that cushioned His little body and wrapped His soul securely against the bitter winds of men's careless ingratitude. From the neighboring Bethlehem, though song rose, it was not sung to honor His birthday. The hands that clasped in glad welcome to relatives were hands that had recently waved away the mother of the Son of God. The warm love of a mother was never more pitifully needed than on that night, when the stinging winds blew callously and ungraciously, less from the hills than from every door and window in His own city.

THE KING

If there was quick faith in the adoration of the shepherds, there was another sort of faith in the cruel planning of the king who ruled in Jerusalem. Even as the Magi knelt to adore Him, swords were being sharpened in expectation of His throat. The last traces of rust disappeared from spear points and brutal hands, already instructed in murder and awaiting orders, gripped tighter the hefts of those spears.

Herod, paying unconscious tribute to the Child he had never seen, paced the floor of his council chamber, hatred eating at his vitals. Soon, he felt, the triumphant faith of these Magi would place the Child within easy reach of sword blade and spear point and death.

The faith of the Magi brought them to their knees in grateful adoration. The faith of Herod brought him to his feet, thirsting for murder.

As Joseph watched against harm, a Roman emperor, long leagues away, issued his orders that there should be no king but Caesar, and bought in good round gold the loyalty of high priests, who knew well that a Child must be born in Bethlehem who would override Rome and shake them from their secure positions. Even as Christmas dawned, Good Friday was being prepared.



Maternal love and the simple devotion of a gentleman of noble but reduced circumstances; the love of the world's purest hearts and the hatred of its vilest; a wedding of heaven to earth as angels sang of glorious news, and with it the cold disinterest of tight little huts and tighter little souls; the romance of a hurried quest across half the known world; murder stalking from a palace and making the first Christian martyrs in the homes of harmless peasants; spontaneous faith eagerly given and hospitality ignobly denied; the surging of heaven itself in a mighty shout of joy and the resentful stirring of earth asleep in its own ugly apathy—all these were present about this Child at the moment of His birth.

Life in its completeness of vice and virtue, enthusiasm and dark contempt, intense joy and profound sorrow, sublime love and blackest hate, high adventuring and bleak doubt, circled the crib of the Christmas Child.

Undoubtedly, as the shepherds returned to their flocks, they remembered only that the Babe was beautiful, the mother unforgettably lovely, and the man wonderfully gracious. At the same time, they knew in their souls that they felt a joy they had never known before.

The Magi, however, traveled back by slow stages. They needed to take time to reason and reflect. Surely, their trained minds marveled at the singular appropriateness of a Child being sent to save the sad old world and end the wearisome night. If they had expected to find a great captain at their journey's end, they now knew how sharp would have been their disappointment if they had, indeed, found a captain. For history had written the record of all too many captains thundering across continents, their progress marked by collapsing cities and the burning huts of farmers, by children whimpering in the shadow of oak trees, and by women hiding their faces from the memory of brutal leers and their own shame.

The old world had been magnificent in the flowering of its conquerors, who had clanked triumphantly along a hundred highways. Unstoppable, they had piled new empires on the ruins of those they had crushed. Atop these swaggering tyrannies they had sat, demanding the tribute of gold and lives, while slaves toiled to death beneath dark foundations and women stifled their tears lest coursing hounds, mail-clad and erect as men, might find them to their ruin.

No need of captains now! The world needed and, happily, the Magi remembered, the world had received, a Child!



Great philosophers had solemnly sat in their quiet groves or among their white marble pillars, and twined grape leaves in the hair of truth. The Magi almost shuddered as they remembered these men who had found truth only to mock it.

They had treated philosophy as a tricky game with which to prove one's glib tongue or to sharpen a bitter eloquence. If today they proved that black was black, tomorrow they felt a perverse joy in proving that black was actually a dull grey, and the next day that it was blood red or yellow as the hair of a girl or the fur of a tiger. Even they, who had seen truth with clear eyes and had written of it with revealing pen, had turned from high thought to base living. They had found the one true God but had left Him to burn incense to the gods of lust and thievery, or to worship their own animal instincts or the vapid applause of the mob.

Truth had been deserted, even by those who knew it best. Truth was deserted for the drinking flagon and the dancing girl, for the groves of Venus and the cellars of Bacchus, for the favor of a ruler who played, drunk or sober, at being divine, or for the smelly shouts of a populace who were bored by any truth that was not flattering or amusing.

At that time, scientists were strangely preoccupied, not with giving life but with teaching men to deal death more effectively. The very roads along which the Magi traveled had been built by scientific men to hasten the conquering march of armies, not to quicken the advance of culture or the sacred progress of God.

The Magi, knowing history, knew these men had not saved, could not save, the world. Knowing nothing of the future, they could hardly guess that in this Child would be revealed the Captain, Philosopher, Guide of the Scientist, Beneficent Conqueror, and King of Kings.

“Out of thee, Bethlehem,” had sung the prophet, “shall come the captain who will rule my people Israel.”

Even the priests, who through this prophecy sent the Magi forward to Bethlehem while they turned back to count their money or court their wives, had told them this.

This Child would someday be the Captain of the armies of the Most High, leading them out to His peaceful conquest of the world.

Under that Captain, white-uniformed companies of virgins would march with red-caped squadrons of martyrs, while vanguards of apostles would swing in advance of legions of doctors and confessors. Yet, over all, there stood the conquering standard of the cross!



Here was to be a Captain whose conquered victims loved Him with grateful, devoted love! The more completely they were conquered, the more deeply would they love Him! Here was a Conqueror whose pathway would be lined, not with the prostrate bodies of helpless victims, but with the upright figures of the saints!

Later all thinkers were to lift their heads in astonished acknowledgment as He said calmly, “I am the truth.” And the world would sit as children at His feet.

Incarnate philosophy, revealed theology, the sum and circle of all essential truth, this Child was to give to a truth-hungry world a knowledge that was more than human and a wisdom that was divine. For the first time men would learn of a truth that did not merely feed the mind. His was a truth that made the heart glow and the tongue shout for joy!

Thus, as wise men had knelt, humbly, learning wisdom from a Babe who lay in a rough-hewn manger, so great philosophers would use His carved figure fixed upon two crossed sticks as their most-supreme textbook.

While scientists, with painful searching, discovered laws in nature, He was the God who had made those laws. His providence had given to these basic elements their powers and the endless combinations on which science mounts to new achievements. "By Him and in Him were all things made, and without Him was made nothing that was made."



One of the Magi, according to a tradition, lived to see the Child grown to manhood.

If this was so, he saw in Him a poet who spoke poetry in beautiful parables and who lived poetry in every kindly gesture and in every loving act.

He saw a King who captured people by way of personal binding and goodness, and held them captive by His generous love.

He saw the very King of Kings who walked among His people and won His endless kingdom only when the devastating charge of His enemies scattered His friends at the base of Calvary's hill, flung Him in final assault to its height, and there inflicted on Him the apparent defeat of death.

If he stood near the cross, that Wise Man could read in the dying eyes of the Savior the same love and tenderness and pitiful searching of the world that he had seen in the eyes of the Child in the crib.

The Magi rode back happy with a peace they had never known before. From the Child they had drunk deep of the happiness that is Christmas. Yet, as they pondered, they realized that, in this Child, they had really seen the birth of a new world. They would remember Him, not as Captain or Scientist or Philosopher or Poet or even as King. He was to them the Child and, as a Child, the symbol of all that the tired, the sick, and the weary old world needed.

Weary with the sickness of sin, the world needed a new birth. Desperate after centuries of deluding dreams and exhausting struggles, the world needed a new hope. In the Child they had seen and worshipped and to whom all mankind would return with each recurring Christmastide, was the new life that was so badly needed.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly." In every child born lies new hope for each generation. Yet, in this Child lay hope for all mankind.

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